DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 314 797 CS 507 018

AUTHOR Nelson, Victoria
TITLE The Gender Gap and Women's Issues in the 1988 Presidential Campaign.
PUB DATE Nov 89
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (75th, San Francisco, CA, November 18-21, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Discourse Analysis; *Females; Political Attitudes; *Political Candidates; *Political Issues; *Presidential Campaigns (United States); Public Opinion; Social Influences; Socioeconomic Influences; *Television Commercials; Values
IDENTIFIERS Bush (George); *Gender Gap; Issue Salience; Political Communication; *Political Image; Political Rhetoric

ABSTRACT

Two factors during the 1988 presidential campaign were largely responsible for the erosion of "women's issues" and the so-called "gender gap"--the perception that a candidate is unattractive to women voters. This perception is thought to be based upon the candidate's stand on issues such as abortion, day care and the Equal Rights Amendment. First, with regard to George Bush, success was gained through a series of interrelated identifications which offered disparate images, each with a potentially persuasive effect on women. One image of Bush was that of law-and-order "Equalizer," which appealed to women who were anxious about crime in the streets and drugs in the schools. Added to this was the kinder, gentler "Father-Knows-Best" image of Bush which reinforced Bush's claim to family values. Yet another effective version was that of Bush as "Bumbler," in which the self-deprecating Bush could laugh at himself and demonstrate his human side. This strategy was successful in the sharp contrast it made to Michael Dukakis, who presented himself as the competent candidate but who was perceived as cold and unlikable. Secondly, the notion of "women's issues" remained somewhat vague and undifferentiated and, as such, was sometimes subsumed under issues of broader social concern. Issues thought to be relevant to women were generally not perceived as crises necessitating governmental response. Furthermore, there was no single advocate, no lobby or spokesperson who promoted these issues to the top of the political agenda. (KEH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED314797

"The Gender Gap and Women's Issues in the 1988 Presidential Campaign"

Victoria Nelson
Department of Communication Studies
Northwestern University
1815 Chicago Avenue
Evanston, IL 60208

CS507018

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Victoria Nelson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

> For eight straight years George Bush hasn't displayed the slightest interest in anything we care about. And now that he's after a job that he can't get appointed to, he's like Columbus discovering America -- he's found child care, he's found education.
>
> Poor George, he can't help it. He was born with a silver foot in his mouth.
>
> --Democratic Convention
> Keynote Speaker
> Ann Richards

Among the problems allegedly facing political candidates in recent years is the so-called "gender gap" -- the perception that a candidate is unattractive to women voters. This perception is thought to be based upon the candidate's stand on issues such as abortion, day care and the Equal Rights Amendment. As the field narrowed to two candidates for the Presidency last year, George Bush's "gap" appeared to be far greater than that of Michael Dukakis. An ABC / Wall Street Journal poll conducted in early June showed that 52% of women voters favored Dukakis as opposed to 28% who favored Bush.[1] Furthermore, according to

market researcher Daniel Yankelovich: "The single largest demographic block of voters" is comprised of "women without a college education: 39.2 percent of the electorate."[2] Nonetheless, Mr. Bush maintained a steady lead in the polls and achieved a solid victory. Though the candidates responded very differently to women's concerns, Mr. Bush captured, or at least quieted that 39.2 percent of the electorate. Instead of alienating women with ideas such as criminal penalties for abortion, voluntary day care and the selection of the telegenic and incompetent Dan Quayle, Bush successfully skirted these pitfalls, if not turning them to political advantage.

How did this happen?

This essay contends that two factors were responsible for the erosion of "women's issues" during the 1988 presidential campaign. With regard to Mr. Bush, success was gained through a series of interrelated "identifications." A persistent theme throughout the campaign was Bush's assertion that he was "in touch with mainstream American values." He then offered widely disparate images of himself and invited the audience's identification with any or all of these. Each had a potentially persuasive effect on women. In addition, the notion of "women's issues" remained somewhat vague and undifferentiated. As such, they were sometimes subsumed under issues of broader social concern. Here are some of the candidates' views on women's issues:

* While Dukakis did not openly endorse the idea of abortion, he stated that the decision of whether to give birth must be made by the mother and not by the federal government. He favored Medicaid financing for abortions for low-income women. Mr. Bush would seek to outlaw abortions except in the cases of rape or incest, or if the life of the mother was at stake. He remained opposed to federal funds for abortions.

* Mr. Dukakis supported the Equal Rights Amendment; Mr. Bush opposes it.

* On the issue of day care, Dukakis supported a bill before Congress which would provide $2.5 billion in assistance to states to make child care more affordable; Mr. Bush has proposed an alternative plan costing $2.2 billion which would provide tax credits to families with young children and an annual income of less than $20,000. During the last Presidential debate, Bush raised the issue of child care, stating:

"I don't want to see the federal government licensing grandmothers... You know, these people laugh about the thousand points of life (sic)... You ought to see around this country what's happening in the volunteer sector. Americans helping America. And I want to keep it alive in child care."

But Jane O'Reilly presents an opposing view:

> Read my lips. Women do not live the same economic lives as men. For full-time, year-round workers, the median income for women is $15,400, while for men it is $24,000. Women and children together account for 78 percent of all people living in poverty. By 1990, 12 million children will need day care, but 87 percent of today's day-care workers, virtually all of them women, receive less than the minimum wage.[3]

In order to reconcile these disparate and rather competing views, Bush began by offering three different "images":

1. Bush as the Equalizer

This is the overplayed law-and-order image, in which we saw Bush talking tough against a backdrop of National Guards-

men, Texas sheriffs and Boston police. He frequently endorsed the death penalty and mandatory sentencing for drug pushers. In his second debate with Governor Dukakis, Bush emphasized this point:

> You see, I do believe some crimes are so heinous, so brutal, so outrageous--and I'd say particularly those that result in the death of a police officer--and for those real brutal crimes, I do believe in the death penalty. And I think it is a deterrent and I think we need it.[4]

These remarks followed Dukakis' objection to the death penalty even if the circumstance were the rape and murder of his wife.

The Willie Horton story received widespread attention in this context, due in part to Bush's incessant repetition of the theme. Bush the Equalizer appealed to women who were anxious about crime in the streets and drugs in the schools. This theme also contained a racial (perhaps racist) subtext including the powerful negative stereotype of the black man raping the white woman. The suggestion was that a Dukakis victory would overturn law and social order. Added to this was Dukakis' failure to respond to the Horton issue, and his opposition to the death

penalty. Women who heard only these messages might be convinced that weekends would bring a fresh batch of rapists to the streets. In an election in which both candidates scored high negatives, this powerful appeal to fear may have nudged women into voting for Bush.

2. Bush as Father Knows Best

In contrast to the Equalizer, this is the kinder, gentler Bush. In these soft-focus commercials, Bush was surrounded by kids, not cops. It's probably no coincidence that the curly-haired toddler featured in these commercials was also the first to run on stage at the close of Bush's acceptance speech, and that she wears the same outfit on both occasions. These visuals seemed to reinforce Bush's claim to family values. Reported the New York Times:

> George Bush's campaign for the Presidency will have an extended entourage that is not so much family tree as family forest. Four generations will be here (New Orleans) when the Vice President accepts the Republican nomination... His four siblings and his five children will vote for him as delegates... In the wake of the emphasis on the Dukakis family at the Democratic National Convention, there has also been a political decision in the Bush camp to give greater exposure to

what Jeb Bush calls the "warm and fuzzy" Bush family tradition of closeness.[5]

But social realities undermine the images: Nearly half of all marriages end in divorce, one-fifth of our children are growing up in poverty and only one-tenth of our families begin to resemble the traditional image depicted by the Bush family. How was this image of Bush convincing?

If Gary Hart and Joe Biden serve as examples, it's clear that the American people hold those who would be President to a higher standard. Behavior that might be acceptable in our own lives is unacceptable in a President -- we want our leader to be better than we are.[6] Perhaps the Bush family, in all of its Rockwellian depictions, came to represent an ideal upon which we could project the hopes we hold for our own families. The ideal Bush clan we saw in commercials and at the convention legitimated Bush's claim to solid values.

3. Bush as Bumbler

Yet another version was that of Bush "holding his charisma in check," the self-depricating Bush. The person who appeared to be playing dirty in a relentless quest to win could then turn around and laugh at himself, inviting his audience not to take him (or his tactics) too seriously. This Bush committed public gaffes, which became opportunities to demonstrate his

human side. He is often rebuked by the rather formidable Mrs. Bush,[7] then slides comfortably into the role of the chastized husband. The notion that Bush is open to this kind of criticism makes him seem vulnerable and likeable, in a silly sort of way:

> Bush disarmed critics and won sympathy with self-depricating vignettes like this one: "I don't want to use the word romantic, but I looked over at (my wife) and said, 'Bar, you mean a lot to me.' She said, 'May I tell you something?' I said, 'Anything.' She said, 'Fish spilled on your red tie...' Forty-three years, I'm talking emotion. We're talking family values here."[8]

The creation of three different images for Bush was a clever and successful campaign tactic. First, it provided voters with a choice; one could pick the George Bush one felt most comfortable with. If Bush's tough "Dirty Harry" language seemed harsh, one could always identify with the man who spilled on his tie and forgot which month it was. Or, one might relax with the notion that a man so loved by his grandchildren would hesitate to put them at risk by jeopardizing world peace.

The strategy was also successful in drawing sharp contrasts between the two candidates. While Dukakis presented himself as

the "competent" candidate, he also appeared cold and unlikeable. Bush may have bumbled, but he seemed human and understandable. Perhaps the sharpest contrast was drawn during the opening moments of the second debate. When questioned about his opposition to the death penalty, Dukakis failed to defend what may have seemed an indefensible position. Instead of offering a reasoned explanation of his position, Dukakis seemed unnerved by the question and spoke about the problem of drugs. By contrast, George Bush's response indicated that he would have sought the death penalty for Kitty Dukakis' killer--something her own husband could not bring himself to do. Dukakis' credibility was damaged by his inability to rationalize his position.

While the candidates seemed to outdo one another on the "family" theme, Bush combined his family man image with the assertion that he represented "mainstream" values. Dukakis had tried to tie into the middle ground by stressing his background as a child of immigrants seeking the American dream. But the Bush image and mainstream message successfully dominated the middle ground. Dukakis' values became, almost by default, out of the mainstream. His immigrant background began to seem alien instead of quintessentially American, and help-ed push him further to the fringe. Thus the various depictions of Bush

also served to define Dukakis as the "iceman," as one so soft on crime that he would not seek to avenge the brutal death of his own wife, and as alien in both pedigree and thinking.

The three-Bush strategy may not have been designed to appeal specifically to women. It may be that the "gender gap" wasn't overcome by the Bush campaign, despite the Vice President's decisive victory. However, it does seem likely that these tactics, images and messages were sufficient to allow women to identify with one or more of them. Whether responding to the "warm and fuzzy" elements, or to blatant fear appeals, enough women were persuaded to ensure a Bush victory.

The success of this strategy is remarkable in light of the virtual disappearance of "women's issues" from the campaign. During the summer, polls indicated that Bush scored high negatives among women voters.[9] It was assumed that Bush's views were not compatible with a majority of women on certain key issues. But specifically what those issues were remains unclear. While numerous magazine and newspaper articles were devoted to child care -- the New York Times devoted a series of editorials to this topic, entitled "An Issue for the No-Issue Campaign"[10] -- both candidates responded with similar child care proposals, and not much was heard after that. On the volatile matter of abortion, the candidates' views differed

sharply. But there is no indication that women don't also differ in their opinions on this issue. Bush's pro-life stance has been repeated often enough; only time will tell whether his conviction is so deep as to attempt a repeal of Roe v. Wade, the judgment which legalizes abortion.

There are a number of problems with the notion of "women's issues," problems which make them easily subsumed or ignored. First, there may be no easily identified category of issues exclusively relevant to women. It is possible that women articulate more concern about certain problems, but undoubtedly these are interrelated with other matters. The economy is one example of an "issue" which affects everyone, but it is one over which voters have minimal control. Republican Party analyst Kevin Phillips believes that what's really bothering women is anxiety over the economy: "It's not 'Morning in America' for women."[11] Yet one's outlook on the economy is determined by any number of other factors such as marital status, the number of dependents, level of education, employment, and so on. What is meant by "women's issues" may reflect a complex set of issues which are interrelated, and which are also connected to broader concerns, such as the overall condition of the nation's economy. Or perhaps they are linked to social norms, to concepts of appropriate

behavior in an era when traditional roles of wife-and-motherhood are rejected or financially obsolete. Our attitudes about the responsibility for appropriate care of our children may be in flux. So too, our attitudes about the role of government in determining what women do with their bodies and their lives may be changing. Therefore, "women's issues" may as yet be undefined, impossible to distinguish in the midst of all other social concerns.

Issues thought to be relevant to women (such as child care, education, abortion, poverty, the Equal Rights Amendment, drug usage, and so on) are generally not perceived as crises necessitating a governmental response. Indeed, in the wake of its series on children, a New York Times / CBS News Poll indicated that only 43% of those surveyed felt that the federal government had a responsibility to provide day care and after-school care; 49% were opposed to the idea. The fact that these issues are viewed not as crises but as ongoing social problems diminishes their importance, especially in the crowded arena of political campaign discourse.

Finally, important though many of these problems may be, there is no single advocate, no lobby or spokesperson able to promote "women's issues" to the top of the political agenda. Without an advocate, these concerns easily dissolve into the social landscape. Perhaps this year, they were lost somewhere between Willie Horton and the idealization of the family.

Why were women supposed to dislike George Bush? It's not

his policies after all, suggests Fred Barnes of The New Republic, it's his personality: "In public, and particularly on television, he comes off as whiny, weak, insincere and goofy."[13] But things are not always as they seem in this perplexing election year. Springing to Bush's defense, another writer decried such criticism: "It's time to trash the nice guys... Watch out for the 'wimp factor' and its hidden agenda." The writer cautions that fear of being labelled a wimp "scares people," such as Bush, "away from caring behaviors they might otherwise practice and admire."[14] The author is Letty Pogrebin, writing for Ms. Magazine.

SOURCES

[1]Gloria Borger, "The Coming Showdown at Gender Gulch," U.S. News and World Report, July 4, 1988

[2]Daniel Yankelovich (editorial), The New York Times, Oct. 7, 1988

[3]Jane O'Reilly, "Candidates Pay Lip Service to the Gender Gap," Chicago Tribune, Oct. 2, 1988

[4]Transcript of the Second Debate Between Bush and Dukakis, The New York Times, Oct. 15, 1988

[5]Wayne King, "Convention for Bush is also a clan reunion," The New York Times, Aug. 15, 1988

[6]Mickey Kaus, Eleanor Clift, John McCormick, "See Dick Run, See Jane Run: All in the Political Family," Newsweek, May 25, 1987

[7]Margaret Carlson, "The Candidates Love Match: Someone Please Stop Them Before They Hug Again," Time, Sept. 26, 1988

[8]William Saletan, "The Politics of Fish," (class handout)

[9] Borger, op. cit.

[10]The New York Times (editorials), Sept. 25-28, 1988

[11]Borger, op. cit.

[12]E.J. Dionne, Jr., "Poll Shows U.S. Voter Optimism is Helping Bush in the Campaign," The New York Times, Oct. 13, 1988

[13]Fred Barnes, "A Fine Romance," The New Republic, July 18, 1988

[14]Letty C. Pogrebin, "Wimplash," Ms. Magazine, September 1988